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ABSTRACT

This study investigated American and Japanese college students' attitudes towards maternal employment. A total of 248 American students at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania and 98 Japanese students at Tohokugakuin University in Japan participated in the study. Students answered a questionnaire about the consequences of maternal employment for children and their own mothers' work status. The study found that both American and Japanese males perceived the costs of maternal employment as being higher than did females. Overall, the Japanese students were more likely to perceive maternal employment as exacting greater costs than American students. The findings suggest that Japanese believe, more so than Americans, that children lose out when mothers work outside the home. The American students' greater actual experience with mothers working outside the home may have contested myths about the negative impact of maternal employment. Contains 14 references. (MDM)

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Japanese and American College Students' Perceptions and Attitudes Towards Maternal Employment

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated college students' attitudes of costs and benefits towards maternal employment. Subjects were taken from colleges both from Japan and the United States. A questionnaire was administered in Japanese to the Japanese subjects and in English to the American subjects. This study attempted to find any cultural differences, along with gender differences when analyzing the perceptions of maternal employment. The BACMEC scale (Beliefs About the Consequences of Maternal Employment for Children) was included in the questionnaire in order to find scores of both the cost and benefit subscale. A 2x2 ANOVA revealed significant differences in perceptions of cost from maternal employment for both gender and nationality. For perceptions of benefits from maternal employment gender differences were found to be significant.

Introduction

In the United States, now more than ever, the two pay check family is the striking trend in the labor force. In 1992, the rate of maternal employment for two parent families was 75.4% for families with children aged 6-17 years, and 59.9% for families with children under the age of six years (US Bureau of Census, 1993). In light of this, research has been done to assess how society perceives the costs and benefits of maternal employment.

Hyde and McKinley (1993) performed a study to gather additional information on the BACMEC (Beliefs About the Consequences of Maternal Employment for Children). A sample of 570 expectant mothers, all of whom were participants in the Wisconsin Maternity Leave and Health Project, completed the instrument. Mothers who were employed reported seeing significantly more benefits to maternal employment than did mothers who were homemakers, and working mothers also reported seeing significantly less costs to maternal employment than did mothers who were homemakers. Fathers agreed more strongly than mothers that there are costs to maternal employment. Also, there were no signifant differences between mothers and fathers for the BACMEC benefit subscale. Husbands of employed women believed that there were significantly more benefits and fewer costs to maternal employment than did husbands of homemakers.

In a study regarding children's perceptions of their parents

(Knaub, 1986), adolescent and young adult children of dual career families were surveyed as to their satisfaction with this lifestyle, perceptions of family strength, and views on various issues related to the dual career lifestyle. In general, the children rated their families relatively high on perceptions of family strengths such as concern, respect and support. The subjects mentioned having positive role models, financial security and the opportunity to develop independence as possible benefits of growing up in a dual career family. These subjects were highly supportive of their parents' dual career lifestyle and they indicated that they thought the benefits of maternal employment outweighed the disadvantages.

In the United States, maternal employment has been viewed by some as being beneficial for a women's emotional state, or morale. Being employed is seen as providing a shield against stress from her role as a mother. Studies with both infants and older children have shown that a mother's satisfaction with her employment status related positively to the quality of a mother-child interaction, as well as to children's adjustment and achievement variables. Much of the literature reveals that maternal employment confers some advantages on children, including greater independence, easier, adjustment to kindergarten, and contact with a more extensive and varied adult support system (Chambliss, Owens and Carr, 1991).

In the United States, maternal employment is seen as having many benefits and not many costs. These attitudes probably both permit the increasing involvement of women in the workplace

(because mothers eschew lifestyle choices that are believed to disadvantage their children) and grow in response to increasing maternal employment (because positive experiences and tendencies to rationalize both strengthen these pro-maternal employment attitudes). However, these views are far from universal. This study will examine cross-cultural diiferences in attitudes about the impact of maternal employment on children by comparing responses of Japanese and American subjects.

American and Japanese societies are both highly developed capitalist countries, however, America and Japan are also culturally distinct societies. While the norm in the United States for couples with young children is for both parents to work outside the home, in Japan typically the husband works outside the home and the wife runs the household. This includes managing the children's daily life, making the purchase of all clothing and equipment, the cleaning and cooking. The mother also represents the family in local activities, on neighborhood committees, and at the PTA meetings (White, 1987).

The value placed on the role of women in Japan derives directly from the national consensus that Japan's most important resource is its children. Therefore women's attentions focus on their children. While the US experienced a dramatic increase in the matenal employment between 1970 and 1988, no parallel change occurred in Japan. In the US, the percentage of women aged 25-34 employed outside the home soared from 44.7% to 72.6% over that eighteen year period. In Japan, the change was negligible, 46.8% in 1970 and 54.5% in 1988 (Monthly Labor Review, 1990). Few women

work outside their home during their children's early childhood. Some mothers may take on part time jobs during the shool hours when their children have reached the school age, however, the model for middle class mothers demands their presence at home when the children return from school and the least sign of a problem will signify to many women that they should quit their jobs (White,1987).

In 1985, Hsu, et.al., did a study that compared the family interaction patterns in families without identified problems and who belonged to two ethnic groups; Americans of Japanese ancestry (the Japanese) and Americans of European ancestry (the Caucasians). The criteria required that both the parents be Japanese or both the parents be Caucasian. A total of twelve families from each ethnic background participated in this study. The two parents were still living together with at least two of their children (aged 10-30) unmarried and still living at home. The tasks were planning an activity, discussing the family's strength and weaknesses. The parents were also asked to discuss the circumstances of their meeting and their decision to marry each other, and describe how decisions were made at home. the results of the study showed that there were significant differences in how the families interacted. It seemed reasonable to assume that the differences observed were primarily related to the ethno-cultural background of the families. The Japanese family tended to behave in ways that were viewed as "traditional"; they were "less direct, somewhat vague, and concealing" in expressing individual thoughts and feelings. This may be related to their concern for maintaining

harmonious social relationships, since it is very important for a Japanese persom to conform to thre group norm and refrain expressing disagreement. The Japanese believe that there is a normative way of doing certain things; they value adherence to this normative behavior.

Another norm that is socially valued in Japan, and is seen as "traditional," involves the perceived importance of women's work as wives and mothers. The basic principle is never to go against the child, and the first order of business is to know one's child thoroughly - his or her weak points, inclinations, and how he or she might be best motivated. For the Japanese mother, there are no shortcuts, hers is a full time job (White, 1987). These cross cultural differences might be expected to yield more negative attitudes toward maternal employment. In this study it was hypothesized that Japanese students of both genders would perceive maternal employment as associated with fewer benefits and more costs for children than American students of both genders.

Methods

Subjects:

The American subjects used in this study were 248 college students. The sample consisted of 112 males and 136 females who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course Ursinus College in Pennsylvania. The subjects ranged in age from 17 to 36 years of age.

The Japanese subjects used in this study were 98 undergraduate students at Tohokugakuin University in Japan. The sample consisted of 39 males and 60 females. The subjects ranged from 18 to 20 years of age.

Procedure:

The packet used in this study was handed out to the subjects in the introductory psychology class in which they were enrolled. Subjects were asked to fill out the packet in this entirety. Ample time was given to the students to complete the questionnaire packet. The packet used in this study consisted of four different parts.

In part one, subjects were asked to provide demographic information and to answer questions concerning their career and family expectations. These questions required subjects to disclose information about their expectations about family plans, job type, job characteristics, and work preference as they relate to their role as a parent. These questions required subjects to indicate their degree of agreement with each statement on a 4 point Likert scale.

Part two of the packet was made up of the BACMEC questionnaire

(Greenberger et al. 1988). The BACMEC is a 24-item scale developed to measure Beliefs About the Consequences of Maternal Employment for Children. The BACMEC included beliefs about both benefits (13 items) and costs (11 items). Studies of five samples (n=375) have demonstrated that the total BACMEC scale and its subscales are highly reliable and have good convergent, divergent, and concurrent validity (Greenberger et al. 1988).

In part three of the packet, subjects were asked to disclose information about their mother's work status at each stage of their development. The stages of development were infancy (birth to 1 1/2 years old), preschool (2 to 5 years old), childhood (6 to 12 years old), and adolescence (13 to 18 years old). The subject were asked to report whether their mothers were employed part-time, full-time, or not employed outside the home during each stage of development. Subjects also disclosed information about their mother's job, indicating whether it was professional, white collar, or blue collar work. Subjects were also asked to indicate whether or not they had been raised in a single parent household.

RESULTS

A 2x2 ANOVA was performed on the costs and benefits subscale scores to assess differences across the sex and nationality groups. This analysis revealed significant sex and nationality main effects in the perceived cost variable. No significant interaction effects on cost were obtained.

The subjects' sex was significantly associated with how the subjects perceived the costs of maternal employment. Across nationalities, men perceived higher costs of maternal employment ($x= 37.66$; $SD= 10.50$; $n=140$) than woman ($x=33.79$; $SD= 9.86$; $n= 182$; $F=13.36$; $df=1,318$; $p< .001$).

The subjects nationality was also significantly associated with how the subjects perceived the costs of maternal employment. The Japanese subjects were more likely to perceive maternal employment as exacting greater costs ($x= 38.41$; $SD= 9.37$; $n=80$) than the American subjects ($x=34.43$; $SD= 10.44$; $n=244$; $F=10.74$; $df= 1,318$; $p<.001$).

On the benefits subscale, a significant main effect for sex was obtained. The subjects' sex was significantly associated with how the subject perceived the benefits of maternal employment; across nationalities, women perceived greater benefits of maternal employment($x=51.10$; $SD=9.41$; $n=182$) than men ($x=47.81$; $SD= 8.77$; $n=140$; $F=11.15$; $df= 1,318$; $p<.001$).

When looking at the subjects' nationality and how it affected

maternal employment attitudes, there was a trend towards American subjects being more likely to perceive higher benefits of maternal employment ($x=50.17$, $SD= 10.44$; $n=140$) than the Japanese subjects ($x=48.21$; $SD=7.93$; $n=80$; $F=3.52$; $df= 1,318$; $p<.06$). No significant interaction effects were found on the perceived benefits subscale.

DISCUSSION

The current findings suggest that males believe, more so than females, that children lose out when mothers work outside the home. This may be because men could have a greater psychological stake in preserving traditional sex roles, because they confer greater prestige and power to males. Since socialization equates males' sense of worth with employment success, male students may be threatened by the prospect of an employed spouse. Perceiving greater costs to children may be a socially acceptable way of discouraging maternal employment, and thereby justifying males' retention of the sole breadwinner role.

In a reciprocal fashion, nontraditional women may downplay the perceived costs of maternal employment in order to reduce the anticipated guilt associated with their future plans to work outside the home. This need to rationalize their personal choice might also account for the females' greater perception of maternal employment benefits to children.

The different perceptions of cost may also be attributable to differing expectations of mothering in men and women. Men may perceive children as more dependent and less resilient than women, and therefore men may believe the child loses more when the mother is employed. Men may also have a more idealized picture of the mother-child interaction than women. For men, deviations from this more idealized view attributable to maternal employment might

therefore be viewed as more costly to children.

Women may see children as somewhat more robust, and/or may be more sensitive to how a mother's isolation from the adult work place can compromise her effectiveness as a nurturer. (Perhaps in part because the women were more heavily identified with their own mothers, some of whom may have been adversely affected by staying at home). This might account for the minimazation of costs to children and their greater emphasis on the potential advantages of maternal employment for children.

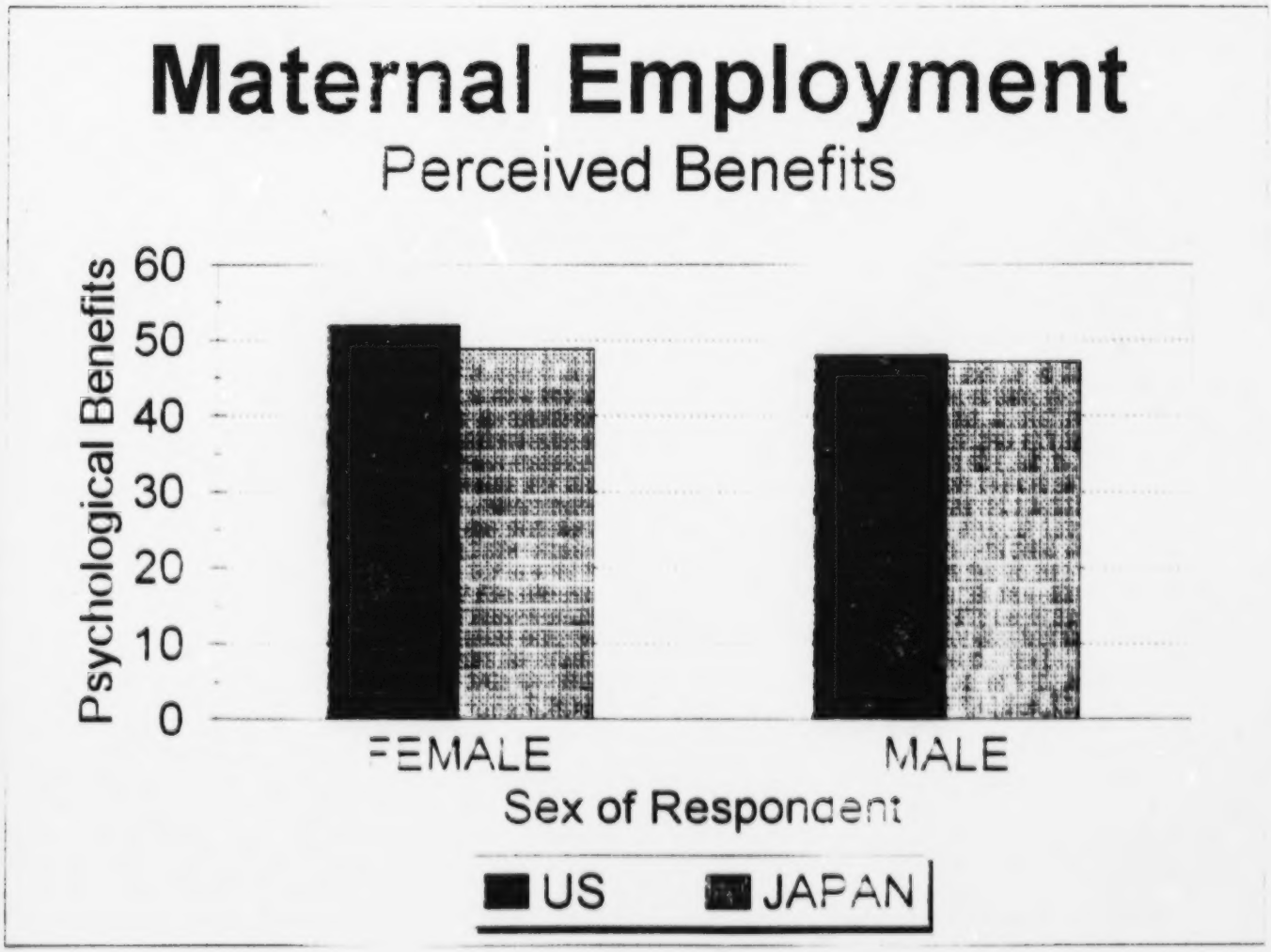
The Japanese subjects perceived a higher cost associated with maternal employment than the American subjects did. This may be a reflection of the fact that maternal employment represents a greater violation of the cultural norm in Japan than the US today. The more traditional Japanese strongly emphasize the value of a mothers' staying at home to take care of children more than most Americans do. Optimally meeting child care responsibilities is seen as requiring the full time talents of a good mother. Maternal employment implies that a mother os neglecting her primary duties.

American subjects were more likely to perceive higher benefits of maternal employment than the Japanese subjects. The fact that the rate of maternal employment for families with children between the ages of 6-17 years is 75.4%, and 59.9% for families with children under the age of 6 years (US Bureau of the Census, 1993), shows that maternal employment in the United States is more widespread than in Japan. The American culture may have a need to promote less negative views of maternal employment to avoid challenging current family practices. Attitudes may de-emphasize

costs and magnify benefits in order to justify the lifestyle choices being made by the majority of American mothers today.

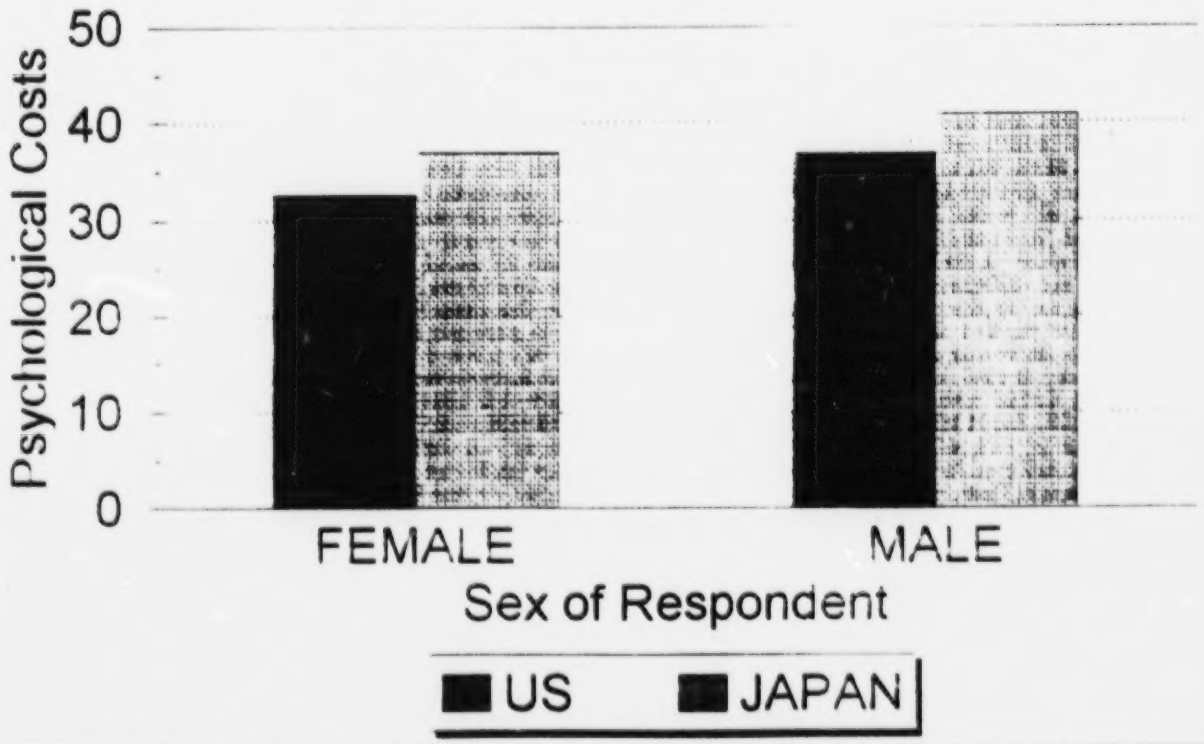
On the other hand, the attitudinal differences across the nations may be less a function of American defensive rationalization and more due to the desensitizing influences of Americans' real experience with maternal employment. The American students' greater actual experience with mothers working outside the home may have contested negative myths about the negative impact of maternal employment. Their first hand exposure to many children of working mothers may have provided powerful challenges to the expectation that maternal employment harms children. If this latter explanation is correct, we might expect attitudes in Japan to shift over time, as maternal employment becomes more commonplace in that country.

Maternal Employment
Perceived costs by Nationality
Psychological Costs
50
40
30
20
10
0
US
JAPAN
Country
FEMALE
MALE


Maternal Employment
Perceived Benefits
Psychological Benefits
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
FEMALE
MALE
Sex of Respondent
US
JAPAN

Maternal Employment

Perceived Costs by Sex



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